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**Militias In Military Doctrine: Implications From The Southern Campaigns of
The American Revolution 1779-1781**

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Executive Summary

Title: Militias In Military Doctrine: Implications From The Southern Campaigns of The American Revolution 1779-1781

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Thesis: Militia forces offer a potentially significant combat multiplier for the United States military in the future. Doctrine, as defined by the Joint Publication is, “Fundamental principles by which the military forces or elements thereof guide their actions...”¹ Stated differently, doctrine is a set of common operating concepts derived at by combining previous experience with emerging technology. As the military continues to refine and further develop its doctrine for the future, it should consider the lessons learned from employing militias and irregular groups in the past and formally codify them in its doctrine.

Discussion: Throughout American military history, conventional forces have often relied on unconventional or militia forces to support their operational and tactical objectives. The use of militias in warfare has proven relevant and viable from the early American colonial period through current conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The American experience with militia forces is not unique but has been replicated and adopted to varying degrees of success by international militaries as well. Despite the important, and sometimes central, role that militias have played throughout history, the use of militia forces receives little mention in our formal military doctrine. This essay will examine several historical accounts of how militias were employed in the Southern Campaigns during the American Revolutionary War; identify important lessons learned from each period, and offer recommendations for how to institutionalize the militia concept for inclusion into formal military doctrine. Although American and international military history is replete with examples of irregular and conventional force cooperation, the period examined in this essay is limited to the American Revolution. Specifically, it will examine lessons learned during the American and British Southern Campaign in 1780 and 1781. The vast mix of partisan, unconventional, and conventional warfare fought by the American and British militaries in the southern colonies provides sufficient scope to thoroughly examine the topic. In order for doctrine to fully encapsulate common warfighting principles based on historical experience, it must include the planning and employment of irregular forces.

Conclusion: An analysis of historical accounts demonstrates the viable role militia forces have played in both conventional and unconventional conflicts. Codifying the experience is necessary in order for doctrine to sufficiently guide employment of military forces in the future.

¹ Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*. JP1-0 (Washington D.C. 8 November 2010).

Introduction

Throughout American military history, conventional forces have often relied on unconventional or militia forces to achieve their operational and tactical objectives. The use of militias in warfare has proven both a relevant and viable military solution spanning from the early American Colonial period through recent conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan. In addition, the American experience with militia forces is not unique, but has been replicated and adopted to varying degrees by international militaries as well. Militia forces offer an important tactical and operational advantage to military commanders able to harness their efforts. Despite the important and often central role that militias have played throughout history, the use of militia forces receives little mention in United States military doctrine. Admittedly, militias are not appropriate in every conflict, and using militias requires commanders to accept increased risk. Militias and irregular forces are often unpredictable, and are not beholden to the same international treaties and agreements as the United States military. However, if employed appropriately, the limitations can be mitigated and irregular forces can offer a significant combat multiplier. This essay will examine the critical lessons learned from the employment of militia and irregular forces by both the British and American conventional forces during the Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution in 1780 and 1781. Furthermore, this essay will show why future military doctrine should include the employment of irregular forces in order to fully provide operating principles for military employment.

Background

Beginning in October 1777, with General John Burgoyne's surrender to the Continental Army at Saratoga, the British war strategy was all but failing.¹ Although the British maintained a sizable numerical advantage in the colonies and had recently captured the American capital in Philadelphia, General William Howe had been unable to strike the decisive blow against the Continental Army he so arduously sought. Although defeated, the Continental Army remained intact and outside the grasp of General Howe.² In addition, the victory at Saratoga allowed the French to formalize their commitment to the Colonies with a treaty in February of the following year. French intervention meant the American Revolution was now more than an internal conflict. It had become a war that would threaten the survival of the entire British Empire.³ The combination of French intervention after Saratoga and an operational stalemate in New England forced the British government to reexamine its strategy during the winter of 1777 and 1778.⁴

The renewed British strategy of 1778, was to protect itself against the new European threat first while maintaining a foothold in the middle colonies. Once the French threat, and by 1779 the Spanish threat, was resolved, Britain could renew its efforts to subdue the colonies. Operationally, this meant General Howe could expect decreasing material and troop support from England as the British moved troops and equipment from America to counter French threats in the West Indies. Frustrated with his inability to achieve a decision against Washington's Army and realizing that future prospects for victory were bleak now that his Army was a supporting effort, General Howe resigned. His former subordinate, General Henry Clinton, quickly replaced Howe as the Commander of the British Army in the colonies.⁵ General Clinton adapted to the supporting role his forces would play by consolidating what forces

remained in the colonies. Upon assuming command, General Clinton withdrew from Philadelphia and consolidated British forces in defensive positions outside New York.⁶

From his position in New York, General Clinton hoped to maintain a foothold in New York and await opportunities to continue fighting.⁷ One such opportunity began to reveal itself in the spring of 1779 in the southern colonies of South Carolina and Georgia. The British government had long contended that support for the crown was stronger in the southern colonies than in the more radical north. Furthermore, the British believed that military success in the south would divide the colonies and isolate New England.⁸ In addition to the possibility of isolating New England, two specific events made the idea of a southern campaign seem plausible. First, in May of 1799, a small British force commanded by Major General Augustine Prevost was able to outmaneuver the southern Continental Army outside Savannah and lay siege to Charleston. The city barely escaped capture. Despite failing to take Charleston, the near capture by a small British force made the prospect of success by a larger force seem likely.⁹ Secondly, in September, a combined French and Continental force failed in an attempt to seize Savannah from a small British garrison. Poor coordination between the French Navy and Colonial Army resulted in disaster for the attackers and the French Navy withdrew to the West Indies.¹⁰ The departure of the French Navy from coastal waters was significant because it allowed the smaller British Navy maneuver space free from the threat of the French warships and gave General Clinton an opportunity to break the stalemate.¹¹

In December 1779, General Clinton put in motion a plan to open a second front in the southern colonies.¹² Between March and May of 1780 in a series of amphibious assaults and siege operations, General Clinton was able to seize the port city of Charleston, South Carolina. In addition to taking Charleston, the British managed to capture the entire Southern Continental

army garrisoned in the city.¹³ By the summer of 1780, 8,000¹⁴ British troops commanded by General Cornwallis were well entrenched along the eastern coast from Savannah, Georgia and Georgetown, South Carolina. Without a Continental Army, the British hoped to begin their southern campaign unopposed. However, the British Army did not fully appreciate that the absence of a conventional force only changed the character of the war in the south from conventional to irregular warfare.¹⁵

A Partisan Insurgency: The War In South Carolina (May-August 1780)

The British strategy for controlling the Southern Colonies was to establish a series of forts inland and along the coast. These forts would serve as both rallying points for British loyalists and strong points from which the British Army could launch attacks throughout South Carolina and Georgia.¹⁶ Once the two southernmost colonies were fully under British control, Loyalist militias could assemble and eventually assume responsibility for security. Once loyalist militias were fully entrenched, the British Army could advance the Southern Campaign into North Carolina.¹⁷ Although estimates of the number of British loyalists eager to rally behind the crown were perhaps overstated,¹⁸ the British Army expected and received very little organized opposition after the seizure of Charleston. What resistance the Army did encounter came in the form of small partisan forces that did not enjoy significant popular support. By August 1780, this dynamic significantly shifted, and small partisan bands were replaced by larger, more organized partisans capable of conducting offensive operations against the British Army.¹⁹

Although a host of factors likely served to transform the small bands of partisans into a popular insurgency, two events stand out. First, on May 29, a British cavalry unit under the

command of Lieutenant Colonel Banastre Tarleton massacred a Continental Infantry unit attempting to withdraw from South Carolina to Virginia. The massacre, now famous as “Buford’s Massacre,” would cement the Colonial perception of the British forces as barbaric.²⁰ Secondly, before leaving Charleston, General Clinton required all citizens in South Carolina to publicly affirm their commitment to the crown by swearing an oath of loyalty. This requirement forced citizens to take sides and fight for the crown if required.²¹ Those citizens unwilling to take such an oath were subject to the brutalities that Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton exhibited upon Colonel Buford’s Continentals.²²

Regardless of specific cause, the cumulative effect of British policies in South Carolina was to give rise to a formidable partisan movement ready to fight an insurgency.²³ The most significant of these militia forces was led by Thomas Sumter.²⁴ Between July and August 1780, Thomas Sumter and a militia of over five hundred Whigs attacked British and Tory positions along the Catawba Valley from Rocky Mount to Hanging Rock.²⁵ On July 12, Sumter’s men captured or killed a force of 300 British Loyalists bivouacked outside the Rocky Mount outpost.²⁶ On 1 August, Sumter laid siege to the Rocky Mount outpost itself. Despite the militias’ determined efforts, their attack failed and Sumter and his men withdrew. During the withdrawal, Sumter’s militia met a British force sent to break the siege on Rocky Mount. In the resulting action, Sumter lost twenty men, for which he gained no tangible tactical advantages.²⁷ But his luck improved. Sumter would have some success in his attack against the Hanging Rock outpost on 6 August. There, the militia succeeded in storming the British outpost however, they forfeited a permanent victory because the militia turned to stripping the garrison of supplies. Discipline broke down so severely inside the fort that the militia was forced to abandon the attack and withdraw.²⁸

Partisan Insurgency: Lessons Learned

The initial partisan experience in South Carolina during the summer of 1780 demonstrated the tenacity and willingness of the colonists to violently oppose British rule, but tactically, the partisans achieved little. Morrill, in his work argues that the experience of Sumter's militia only served to reinforce the lessons from Briar Creek and Stono Ferry.²⁹ A partisan force could harass and harry, but alone, could not defeat a conventional force.³⁰ Morrill specifically states that, "No matter how important the contributions of partisan leaders like the Carolina Gamecock [Thomas Sumter] might be, the ultimate fate of patriot forces in the South also depended upon the presence of regular troops proficient in the techniques of eighteenth century combat..."³¹ The primary difference between the hit and run tactics of the South Carolina partisans, and the same tactics employed by Washington's Continental Army is that the Continental Army had the means to be decisive when the opportunity arose. This shortfall is the central lesson for Commanders and planners, who seek to take advantage of local militias, should take away from the early partisan experience in South Carolina. With rare exception, militias and partisan forces require the direct support of conventional forces to tactically defeat an opposing conventional force.³² Despite this shortfall, the partisan forces in South Carolina did achieve some significant effects, particularly psychological and moral.³³ The presence of partisan fighters forced the British to garrison population centers, made loyalist reluctant to openly support the British cause, and prevented the army from moving quickly through South Carolina. When necessary, partisan militias can be employed independent of conventional forces if their objectives remain limited. Shaping operations are perhaps one such area.³⁴ Although unintended, shaping is precisely the role that Sumter's militia performed while awaiting the reconstitution of the Southern Continental Army.³⁵

A Second Southern Continental Army and Cornwallis' Dilemma

The requirement to reestablish a second Continental Army in the south was not lost on General Washington or the Continental Congress. While Colonial militias like the ones led by Francis Marion and Thomas Sumter harassed the British Army in June and July of 1780, a second Continental Army formed. The nucleus of the Second Southern Army was a small force of 1,400 regulars commanded by Baron de Kalb. Initially sent as a relief force to aid General Lincoln in Charleston, Baron de Kalb and his soldiers became the Southern Continental Army by default when Lincoln surrendered.³⁶ In July of 1780, against General Washington's wishes, the Continental Congress appointed General Horatio Gates to relieve Baron de Kalb and assume command of the force that was now officially the Southern Continental Army.³⁷ The new army continued to march south, and by August of 1780, pushed into South Carolina. Bolstered by militia forces from North Carolina and Virginia, the Southern Continental Army numbered just over 4,000.³⁸ General Gates decided to begin his Southern Campaign by testing his new army against what appeared to be an easy target: the British outpost at Camden.³⁹

The newly arrived conventional force created a tactical dilemma for General Cornwallis. Prior to the arrival of the Southern Continental Army, with only militia forces to deal with, Cornwallis and the British could organize and fight in the classic counterinsurgency model. This model meant spreading his forces thinly across the South Carolina countryside to deny safe havens to the militia.⁴⁰ This was a reasonable tactic as the militia threat, though annoying, posed little risk to the British Army. The new threat posed by the Second Continental Army now necessitated a change in strategy. Cornwallis would have to fight both a counterinsurgency and

conventional conflict at the same time. The tactical dilemma that faced Cornwallis was thus: fighting in a conventional style exposed his army to the natural strengths of the southern militia, and to fight along counterinsurgency lines left his forces vulnerable to defeat in detail by the Continental Army.⁴¹ Piers Macksey describes Cornwallis' dilemma best in the following two quotations:

As long as the enemy had a nucleus of regular troops the occupied areas could never be properly garrisoned or pacified. Around the Continentals gathered the hordes of militiamen, to be defeated and dispersed at great cost in British lives, only to assemble again as soon as the Continentals rallied.⁴²

The British situation in the Carolinas was not unlike that of the Napoleonic armies in Spain when Wellington hovered on the Portuguese frontier. As long as they were able to disperse they could check the guerrillas and secure their supplies, and eventually would bring the population to acquiesce in their rule. But when they had to concentrate against a regular force they released their hold on the countryside, and the flames of civil war burst forth.⁴³

This same tactical problem would comfort Cornwallis and the British Army for the remainder of their southern campaign. In August of 1780, the most obvious solution to his dilemma was to meet and rapidly destroy the new Continental Army at Camden.⁴⁴

Camden

As Gates and the Southern Army entered South Carolina, they entered a theater where war was already in progress. In addition to Thomas Sumter, two other charismatic leaders, Francis Marion and Andrew Pickens, had formed partisan groups of their own to oppose the British occupation.⁴⁵ Although it was clear the partisan bands lacked the capacity to win decisive victories against the British, leaders like Sumter, Marion, and Pickens had no requirement, other than sense of purpose, to feel beholden to General Gates and his command. Likewise, General Gates had little confidence in partisan forces.⁴⁶ In his mind, their

unconventional style and tactics made them more unreliable than the militia. As a result, when Marion and his band met General Gates outside Camden and offered their services to the General in the upcoming fight, they found themselves relegated to menial tasks that would have no bearing on the battle.⁴⁷ Sumter's men were equally demoted and assigned route security tasks.

As the Southern Continental Army approached Camden and prepared to lay siege to the outpost, the four thousand man army consisted largely of militias. The North Carolina and Virginia state militias made up the majority of his force.⁴⁸ Additionally, unbeknownst to General Gates, General Cornwallis was advised of the impending attack and was rapidly closing on Camden with a force of over 2,000. Unlike Gates' force, General Cornwallis' army consisted primarily of British regulars.⁴⁹ General Gates would discover the presence of the British Army in the early morning of 16 August. As his army attempted to move against Camden during the cover of darkness, they were met by the British cavalry commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Tarleton. After a brief meeting engagement between British and Continental cavalry, both armies halted to await daylight.⁵⁰

After the early morning cavalry engagement, Gates realized the accurate size and strength of his opposition. The fight for Camden would not be against a small force of seven-hundred Tory militia. However, believing that a fight was inevitable, he deployed his army and prepared to give battle.⁵¹ Gates chose to array his army along a north to south running road with his Continental regulars on the right side and state militias on the left.⁵² The militias were an easy target, and the British launched an attack against the left flank of the Continental army. The result was a British rout of the American militia. As Higginbotham reports, "The British right swept forward, yelling and flourishing their bayonets, driving the shaky militia before them."⁵³ The effort of the Continental regulars to halt the militia retreat or stop the onslaught was futile.

In short order, the Continentals joined the retreat and the entire second Southern Continental Army was routed.⁵⁴ The outcome of the battle at Camden was to reduce the Continental Army from 4,000 on 16 August to 700 by 18 August.⁵⁵ The sum total the effect had on the American cause in South Carolina is best described by Morrill when he says, “The struggle to win independence from Great Britain had reached its nadir in the South in late August 1780. Alarming, growing numbers of settlers, whose inclination to be for one side or the other was commonly dictated by immediate self-interest, began to take up arms for the king now that the armies of Benjamin Lincoln and Horatio Gates had been destroyed.”⁵⁶ A significant defeat of both the Continentals and the supporting militia at Camden left the American sympathizers in South Carolina with no flag to rally around.⁵⁷

Lessons Learned: Camden

The principle lesson from Camden is one of more than basic tactic. Rather, it is about understanding the capabilities of the Southern Continental Army. As proven at Camden, militia forces must avoid fighting with conventional tactics against a conventional force.⁵⁸ Some authors and historians typically point to General Gates’ tactic of employing militia units alone on his left flank as the cause for such dramatic defeat.⁵⁹ While this is certainly true, the lesson of Camden is more than one of appropriate order of battle. This assessment would lead students of Camden to infer that the results would have been different had Gates employed the militia elsewhere in his battle formations. Some might conclude that if Gates would have employed his militia forces in a less critical location, or perhaps interspersed them with Continental troops, the result would have been different. This assessment is short sided and misses the principle lesson of employing militia and partisan forces. Gates’ true failure is that he attempted to employ

militia troops as if they were trained and equipped regulars. Regardless of where he assigned the militia in his battle formation at Camden, Gates would have exposed the natural weakness of militia to the strength of his more conventional enemy. The same critique can be applied to Sumter in his battles at Rocky Mount and Hanging Rock. In both of those engagements, his partisan force met with defeat while attempting conventional operations against deliberately defended positions. Morrill accurately captures the central lesson from Camden in the following quote, “He [Gates] violated several fundamental principles of the military arts. First an officer must have a firm understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of his men. To expect the Virginia and North Carolina militia to repulse British regulars, especially on a battlefield where the level terrain of widely-spaced pine trees was well suited for traditional eighteenth century style tactics, was totally unrealistic.”⁶⁰ The failure of the Continental Army at Camden and the important lesson that Morrill highlights is that militia forces, even alongside regular forces, must be employed within the capabilities.⁶¹

In addition to the primary lesson of militia employment, several other lessons about militia fighting can be gained from the battle at Camden. First, Gates seemed to have enjoyed the support of both Sumter and Marion prior to the battle.⁶² In fact, perhaps in recognition of the importance of a conventional army, both Sumter and Marion performed as Gates’ subordinates during the battle.⁶³ Commanders and planners in the future cannot assume the same level of support and agreement. Unity of purpose with partisan and militia forces may be sufficient in the absence of unity of effort. Secondly, the tactical dilemma the combination of militia, conventional, and partisan forces created for Cornwallis and the British Army should not be overlooked. Freed from the requirement to seize and control terrain, the Southern Continental Army could afford to be smaller than the British Army. Commanders in the future should seek

to create and exploit a similar dilemma for the enemy. Likewise, commanders should examine the actions of the British Army to glean insights should they face a similar dilemma. Cornwallis' rapid move to quickly deal with the Continentals, the most dangerous threat to his army, was a plausible solution to ending the dilemma.

Kings Mountain

While the tactical dilemma for Cornwallis abetted somewhat after his defeat of the Second Southern Continental Army, the operational dilemma remained. To continue his campaign of pacifying the southern Colonies, Cornwallis had to move against rebels and partisans in North Carolina. The operational dilemma for Cornwallis was one of over extension. His own Tory militia was insufficient in capacity to maintain security in his rear as the army continued North. Despite concerns and obvious risk of losing gains in South Carolina, Cornwallis decided he must attack the American partisan forces in North Carolina. Cornwallis charged Major Ferguson and his Tory militia to protect his rear and flank.⁶⁴

Ferguson's tactical task is best described as a guard mission. He would guard Cornwallis' western flank as the British Army marched into North Carolina. Throughout the march, Ferguson planned to remain in close contact with Cornwallis so that both forces would remain mutually supportive.⁶⁵ In addition to guarding Cornwallis' flank, Ferguson hoped to draw more loyalists to the British cause.⁶⁶ Although Ferguson's force would be comprised only of Tory militia, Ferguson himself was a professional soldier and proven commander. As Cornwallis set out for North Carolina on 7 September, Ferguson and a band of just over 1,000 militia also began to march. Sweeping west of Cornwallis, Ferguson began his campaign of recruiting settlers loyal to the British and punishing those unwilling to support the cause.

Ferguson's tactics would be reminiscent of Tarleton's massacre and Clinton's loyalty oath. Neutrality and opposition received equal treatment. Both Ferguson's tactics and message preceded him as he marched Northwest across South Carolina.⁶⁷

It did not take long for the allure of crushing rebels to lure Ferguson away from his order to maintain direct contact with Cornwallis' army. In particular, the opportunity to capture Thomas Sumter convinced Ferguson to sweep far west of Cornwallis' army. The action left Cornwallis blind and Ferguson beyond the reach of the British army.⁶⁸ Furthermore, Ferguson's warnings to undecided settlers had an unintended effect. Far from convincing them to join the British cause, the warnings served to strengthen resolve to oppose the British. One group of settlers in particular, known as the "Overmountain Men"⁶⁹ would band together and begin to hunt and trap Ferguson.⁷⁰

The army of settlers, led by William Campbell, set out on 1 October to trap Ferguson's Tory militia. When Ferguson was appraised of the new threat, he was dismissive and made no efforts to rejoin Cornwallis' Army with haste. Instead, he marched his force south and by 6 October, occupied a position on King's Mountain. On the same date, William Campbell's band had grown in strength to over 1,700 and tracked the Tories to within a day's march.⁷¹ When Campbell received news of Ferguson's position, he set out immediately to close the distance.⁷²

The Battle of Kings Mountain began as soon as Campbell's force arrived at the base of the mountain on the afternoon of 7 October. Despite an exhausting march, the settlers were eager to ensure Ferguson could not escape. In only an hour of fighting, Ferguson's entire force was either captured or killed. Once Ferguson was cut down, the Tory resolve died with him and their defensive positions were overrun. The loss of his covering force, and the realization that

American partisans in South Carolina were now unchecked, forced Cornwallis to abandon his campaign in North Carolina before it could begin.⁷³

Lessons Learned: Kings Mountain

The lessons of Kings Mountain for militia employment reinforce those of earlier experiences with one important addition. It is not sufficient for militias and conventional forces to operate in the same theater; they should remain mutually supportive. The seeds for Ferguson's disaster at Kings Mountain were sown when he chose to break away from Cornwallis' army. Even on 6 October, when Ferguson first occupied Kings Mountain, he had every prospect for victory and assumed relief would come in time.⁷⁴ In fact, after the battle, Campbell's men did not take time to savor victory for fear that the British Cavalry was likely near.⁷⁵ No such relief force was in route, as Cornwallis would not hear of Ferguson's predicament until the battle was over.⁷⁶ Although impossible to confirm, the outcome might have been different had Ferguson not strayed. When employing and maneuvering both militia forces and conventional forces independently, commanders must maintain the two in positions of mutual support. Not only is the militia vulnerable without the support of a conventional force, but the asymmetric advantages they offer the conventional army is negated.

Getting It Right: Battle of Cowpens

Following the British defeat at King's Mountain in the fall of 1780, Cornwallis abandoned hopes of carrying his campaign into North Carolina for the year and settled into winter quarters. The Continental Army, following its defeat at Camden, managed to reorganize outside of Charlotte, North Carolina. By the winter of 1780, the Southern Continental Army consisted of 1,500 regular troops in a poor state of health.⁷⁷ When General Nathanael Greene assumed command of the Southern Army in December, he remarked, "The appearance of the troops was wretched beyond description."⁷⁸ The Southern Continental Army in effect, existed in name only.⁷⁹

Immediately upon arrival, Greene set about rebuilding his dilapidated force. He placed two of his most talented officers in the billets of Commissary General and Quartermaster.⁸⁰ He met with the partisan leaders Sumter, Marion, and Pickens and encouraged them to fight alongside the Continental Army as traditional militia.⁸¹ Like Gates and Washington, Greene felt that a conventional military force was required to achieve victory in the south.⁸² In describing the potential of partisan forces Greene said, "Partisan strokes in war are like garnishings on a table, they give splendor to the army and reputations to the officers; but they afford no substantial national security."⁸³ Unlike Gates however, Greene understood the viability and appreciated the potential of partisan and militia forces.⁸⁴ In conjunction with a conventional force, they added a long range reconnaissance and strike capability the Continental Army was missing. Additionally, Greene understood the psychological effect of the partisans. The partisans could quickly garner the support of the population while simultaneously deterring British loyalists from supporting Cornwallis.⁸⁵ Perhaps most significantly, Green understood

that a consistent partisan threat in the South Carolina backcountry prevented Cornwallis from fully massing his force and attacking the Continentals.⁸⁶

Further complicate the tactical dilemma for Cornwallis, Greene defied military tradition and divided his army.⁸⁷ Half of his army he placed under the command of General Daniel Morgan and while he retained direct command of the second half.⁸⁸ Dividing his army gave Greene more options to force Cornwallis to react and eased the burden of foraging to supporting his troops.⁸⁹ Eager to gain the initiative, Greene ordered Morgan to move his force south and threaten British posts in South Carolina. On 20 December, Morgan departed Charlotte to force Cornwallis into a decision.⁹⁰ Of the nine hundred soldiers under Morgan's command, only 290 were regulars.⁹¹ The remainder was a mix of militiamen from Virginia and Georgia and partisans from South Carolina led by Andrew Pickens.⁹²

In response to the threat, Cornwallis divided his army as well. A light force of just over 1,000 cavalry and infantry, commanded by Tarleton, moved to counter Morgan's army while Cornwallis and the bulk of the British force remained in place to block any move Greene might make towards Charleston.⁹³ As he managed against Gates at Camden, Cornwallis sought to end his tactical dilemma by rapidly destroying the conventional threat first. Shortly after Tarleton started out, Cornwallis also departed from winter quarters with the remaining British force. So eager was Cornwallis to destroy Morgan's force, he elected to march without waiting for his own reinforcement of over 1,000 troops only days away.⁹⁴

On 15 January, after learning of Tarleton's approach, Morgan reversed course and moved north to link-up with Greene's force. Morgan held little confidence in his militia's ability to fend off an attack by Tarleton's regulars and hoped to outrun the British advance by retreating to

North Carolina.⁹⁵ Despite his lightened force, Tarleton had closed to within five miles of Morgan by 16 January.⁹⁶ Believing attack imminent, and fearing an attack while he was moving, Morgan chose to halt his retreat and fight at a prominent nearby landmark known as the Cowpens.⁹⁷

Arriving at the Cowpens on the afternoon of 16 January, Morgan had time to prepare for the expected British assault. Morgan's plan was to maximize the capabilities to his militia units by using them as skirmishers and to form the initial line of battle. Behind the militia, Morgan placed his tested regulars. As the British attacked, the skirmishers forced the British to deploy into assault formations. The skirmishers also obscured the battlefield and successive defensive lines behind them. The British were forced to commit to battle without understanding Morgan's disposition. When the skirmishers withdrew, Tarleton was eager to pursue and not allow the skirmishers an opportunity to reform. After pursuing the skirmishers over a short rise, the British met the line of militia troops. Once in range, the militia began to volley fire into the British ranks. However, before the British were close enough to commence a bayonet charge, the militia ranks withdrew to positions behind the Continental regulars. After completing their withdraw, the militia reformed and assumed positions to protect the flanks of the Continentals.⁹⁸ The British, seeing the retreat they expected, pushed the attack. One hundred and fifty yards behind the initial militia line, the British advance ground to a halt upon approaching the line of Continentals. The British, believing they were in pursuit, were unprepared and unformed. The Continentals began to volley fire into the British ranks. After several volleys, the Continentals charged the disorganized British ranks. Despite attempts to reform, Tarleton watched his disorganized army panic and retreat from the field.⁹⁹

Lessons Learned: Cowpens

Prior to the battle of Cowpens, both General Green and General Morgan held doubts of the viability of partisan and militia forces to be decisive.¹⁰⁰ The battle of Cowpens confirmed those doubts and the earlier lessons learned at Camden. Partisan forces alone were insufficient to gain a decisive victory against a conventional force. However, beyond that limitation, as Cowpens demonstrates, partisan and militia units are viable if employed within their capacities.

Task organization of militias and partisans is perhaps the most critical lesson learned from the battle of Cowpens. Unlike General Cornwallis before the battle of King's Mountain, General Morgan did not separate his militia geographically. Instead, he maintained his militia and conventional forces in a unified command structure. Morgan's partisan and militia forces remained tied both tactically and operationally to his conventional force.¹⁰¹ This structure ensured Morgan maintained the unity of effort that Cornwallis lost when he detached Ferguson's militia. When detached, the inherent weaknesses of militias and partisan forces are exacerbated. The loose command structures and ad hoc organization that often characterize partisan units make them unreliable as independent maneuver forces. Additionally, militia forces operating independently are vulnerable if forced into decisive engagement by an opposing conventional army.¹⁰² However, operating in tandem with a conventional maneuver force mitigates the weaknesses of militias. For Cornwallis, social stigmatism about irregulars may have prevented him from adopting a similar structure in his own army. He certainly had little confidence in militias, and loathed the idea of his British regulars fighting alongside a militia.¹⁰³ In the future, conventional militaries must appreciate the realities of militia limitations in this regard. While militias are dependent on conventional forces, the relationship is symbiotic. Militias, as in the

case of Morgan's militia, provide a tactical advantage conventional armies cannot often replicate.¹⁰⁴

Secondary to organization, commanders must consider appropriate employment of militias. During the battle of Camden, militias organized as recommended above. However, Camden was a catastrophic failure, not because of organization, but because of inappropriate employment. At Cowpens, Morgan understood both the inherent strengths and weaknesses of his militia and used both to his advantage. His use of militia riflemen on a skirmish line allowed them to take advantage of terrain and forced the British to deploy into combat formations before they were prepared. By planning for his militia on the skirmish line and the first line to withdraw, he was able to allow them to retreat in good order and without unnecessarily exposing his conventional forces. Morgan also used the militia's weakness to his advantage. Eager to repeat their victory at Camden and expecting the militia to flee, the British haphazardly pursued the withdraw without considering the disposition of Morgan's conventional force. When confronted with withdrawing militia, the British saw exactly what they expected and never considered the possibility of deception.¹⁰⁵ While military history is replete of examples where a range of units is employed in deception, commanders should consider militias especially adept for the role.

Militias in Contemporary Doctrine

Before making specific recommendations for how to apply the lessons learned from the Southern Campaigns of 1780 and 1780, it is necessary to examine how irregular forces are addressed in current U.S. military doctrine. In joint operations doctrine, the publications largely ignore the role of militias and irregular forces in supporting conventional operations. Although

irregular warfare is addressed extensively in joint publications, such as *Joint Operations* (JP 3-0), *Foreign Internal Defense* (JP 3-22), *Counterinsurgency Operations* (JP 3-24) and *Special Operations* (JP 3-05), the concept of using militias is not mentioned.¹⁰⁶ When militias or irregular forces are mentioned in joint doctrine, the connotation is universally negative and the focus of effort is on disarming and disbanding them.¹⁰⁷ Despite the undeniable role irregular forces have played in supporting the United States military objectives throughout history, the concept receives no mention in joint doctrine.

Marine Corps doctrine also marginalizes the role of irregular and militia forces. The *Marine Corps Operations* (MCDP 1-0) and *Expeditionary Operations* (MCDP 3) publications do not mention the use of militias in support of conventional military operations.¹⁰⁸ The Marine Corps *Counterinsurgency* (MCWP 3-33.5) publication takes a view of militias similar to that of the joint publications mentioned above.¹⁰⁹ One publication that does give credence to the idea of using militias or, “Auxiliary Forces,” is the United States Marine Corps *Small Wars Manual*.¹¹⁰ While the *Small Wars Manual* does address militia employment, the context is limited to counterinsurgency, and militias are described only as augments to professional security forces.¹¹¹ The American and British experience with militia forces during the American Revolution suggests application in a broader context is needed.

Recommendations: Thoughts on how to Institutionalize Militias in Doctrine

The concept of employing militia forces does not require its own doctrinal or reference publication. Employment of militia forces to achieve the operational and tactical goals of conventional forces should not be viewed as a special circumstance. Rather, employment

options should be a consideration of commanders in every type of warfare and throughout each phase of combat operations beginning with initial planning.

Because the viability of irregular forces is not always immediately evident, the potential to use irregular forces should be a consideration of commanders beyond the initial planning process. In some instances, local armed forces willing to support U.S. efforts may be present in contested areas prior to the introduction of conventional forces. Thomas Sumter's band in South Carolina is one example. Another is the role of French partisans before the amphibious landings in North Africa during Operation Torch.¹¹² A more recent example is the role of Northern Alliance forces fighting the Taliban during the opening phase of Operation Enduring Freedom. In other cases, employing irregular forces may not be realistic during the beginning phases of an operation. Instead, they may only support conventional forces when an acceptable level of security is established. The British experience in Malaysia is one such example.¹¹³ As often as commanders reexamine their current operational and tactical strategies, they should also reassess the viability of militia forces. These considerations will be overlooked if not institutionalized in planning publications.

In addition to planning, incorporating the specific lessons learned and options for employment also is necessary. The Marine Corps and Joint *Counterinsurgency* publications are obvious choices to incorporate lessons germane to counterinsurgency warfare. Outside of counterinsurgency specific operations, employment of militias and irregular forces should be addressed in the Marine Corps Warfighting Publication *Ground Combat Operations* (MCWP 3-1). Specifically, the concept should be addressed in the *Operations Other Than War* chapter of the publication. The *Operations Other Than War* chapter does mention the possibility of supporting an insurgency in order to achieve objectives; however, the concept is described as

unlikely for conventional forces.¹¹⁴ While this may be true concerning insurgencies, the chapter does not address the employment of irregular forces in other types of conflict. By not addressing this concept, the Marine Corps' doctrine ignores a reality of ground combat operations in the past and the likely challenges commanders will face in the future.

Conclusion

The American military experience demonstrates the broad use of militias and irregular forces throughout history. Although this essay examines only the use of militias during the American Revolution, nevertheless, the lessons learned have relevance for the future. As technology increases, irregular forces will play an increasingly prominent role in the battlefield environment. Along with this reality, they will also remain a viable solution for achieving operational and tactical objectives. If our military doctrine is to provide a comprehensive foundation for military operations, it must recognize and institutionalize the role of irregular forces. As described, employment of irregular forces requires accepting additional risk. However, the risk can be mitigated by incorporating the lessons learned and potential concepts of employment into military doctrine.

Notes

¹ John W. Gordon. *South Carolina and The American Revolution*. (Columbia. University of South Carolina Press. 2003 56-57

² Robert Coakley and Stetson Conn. *The War of The American Revolution*. (Washington D.C. Center of Military History) 55-58

³ Gordon 56-57

⁴ Gordon 58

⁵ Coakley and Stetson 64-68

⁶ Coakley and Stetson 64-68

⁷ Piers Mackesy. *The War for America 1775-1783*. (University of Nebraska Press. 1993) 212-215

⁸ Gordon. 61-62

⁹ Coakley and Stetson. 68-71

¹⁰ Coakley and Stetson. 68-71

¹¹ Gordon. 61, 70

¹² Don Higginbotham. *The War of American Independence*. (New York: Northeastern University Press. 1983) 356

¹³ Dan L. Morrill. *Southern Campaigns of the American Revolution*. (Baltimore. The Nautical and Aviation Publishing Company of America.) 69-73

¹⁴ Coakley and Stetson. 70

¹⁵ Morrill. 73

¹⁶ Morrill. 75-76

¹⁷ Morrill. 75-77

¹⁸ Don Higginbotham. 353- 354

¹⁹ Gordon. 85-90

²⁰ Morrill. 77-78

²¹ Gordon. 87-88

²² Gordon. 88

²³ Gordon. 88

²⁴ Gordon. 89-90

²⁵ Morrill. 82-84

²⁶ Morrill. 83

²⁷ Gordon. 90

²⁸ Gordon. 91

²⁹ Briar Creek (March 1779) and Stono Ferry (June 1779) were fought prior to British seizure of Charleston in May 1780. In both cases militia forces were defeated by a smaller force of British regulars. Stono Ferry is covered in Gordon (67-69). Briar Creek is described in Morrill (50)

³⁰ This assessment is based on the failure of Thomas Sumter and his partisan forces to achieve victory at both Hanging Rock and Rocky Mount. In both cases Sumter and his men held a numerical advantage but lacked the training, proficiency, and equipment necessary to assault deliberate defensive positions. These two skirmishes are covered in both Morrill (83-84) and Gordon (90-91)

³¹ Morrill 83

³² As evidenced by the militia battles fought

³³ Gordon 91. Gordon's specific quote on the topic is "Sumter's actual military achievements in this period were less important than the fact that he was willing to fight. The real significance was that Sumter's emergence-and those like him-signalized a general rising the in a substantial portion of the state, very nearly the whole eastern on-third of it."

³⁴ The idea of using a partisan force to shape in advance of a conventional force belongs to Dr. John Gordon. The concept was posed to the author as a point for consideration during a discussion on the topic.

³⁵ It should be noted that current research leads the author to conclude that the shaping actions conducted by partisan forces were not done deliberately in support of the Continental Army. In fact, the intent of the partisan forces in the summer of 1780 was to defeat the British Army, not merely shape the battlefield. The sum total of their efforts during that summer, however, is best described as a shaping action.

³⁶ Morrill 86

³⁷ Morrill 86. The conclusion that General Washington did favor General Gates as the Commander for the Southern Continental Army is based on Washington's desire to see Nathanael Green appointed.

³⁸ Morrill 85-89

³⁹ Morrill 87-89

⁴⁰ Piers Mackesy. *The War for America 1775-1783*. (University of Nebraska Press. 1993) 404

⁴¹ Mackesy. 404-405

⁴² Mackesy. 404

⁴³ Mackesy 404-405

⁴⁴ Gordon 92

⁴⁵ Gordon 104-105

⁴⁶ Donald Chidsey. *The War In The South: The Carolinas and Georgia In The American Revolution* (New York. Crown Publishers Inc. 1969) 93

⁴⁷ Gordon 108

⁴⁸ Morrill 90-91

⁴⁹ Morrill 90-91

⁵⁰ Morrill 91-92

⁵¹ Morrill 92

⁵² Gordon 94

⁵³ Higginbotham 360

⁵⁴ Morrill 94

⁵⁵ Morrill 95

⁵⁶ Morrill 96

⁵⁷ Morrill 95-96

⁵⁸ Morrill 91

⁵⁹ Authors that have supported this conclusion include: Higginbotham in the following quote, "But Gates' tactics as the two armies engaged in battle at dawn were absurd. Entrusting his untrained militia with the entire left side of the American line, with the bulk of de Kalb's Continentals on the right and the remainder of the regulars in the rear, Gates put an incredible faith in the irregulars to stand resolutely in open combat." (359-360) Donald Chidsey arrives at a similar conclusion in his book *The War In The South: The Carolinas and Georgia In The American Revolution* (97-99). The same can be said of Coakley and Conn in their assessment (70-71).

⁶⁰ Morrill 91

⁶¹ Morrill 91

⁶² Gordon 107-108

⁶³ Morrill 91

⁶⁴ Mackesy 344-345

⁶⁵ Chidsey 104

⁶⁶ Gordon 112-114

⁶⁷ Chidsey 103-105

⁶⁸ Chidsey 104

⁶⁹ Chidsey 106

⁷⁰ Chidsey 106-109

⁷¹ Chidsey 110

⁷² Chidsey 109-111

⁷³ Chidsey 105-113

⁷⁴ Chidsey 111

⁷⁵ Chidsey 113

⁷⁶ Chidsey 105

⁷⁷ Morrill 118

⁷⁸ Morrill 118

⁷⁹ Morrill 118

⁸⁰ Morrill 120

⁸¹ Morrill 121-122. Although Sumter agreed to support, he did not agree to subordinate his force to Greene. Sumter did not participate at the Battle of Cowpens because he would not subordinate his command to Daniel Morgan. See Morrill 127.

⁸² Morrill 122

⁸³ Morrill 122

⁸⁴ Morrill 121

⁸⁵ Morrill 121-122

⁸⁶ Gordon 125-126

⁸⁷ Gordon 126

⁸⁸ Gordon 126

⁸⁹ Morrill 123

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- ⁹⁰ Morrill 123
- ⁹¹ Kenneth Roberts. *The Battle of Cowpens*. (New York: Doubleday & Company. 1958) 60-61
- ⁹² Roberts 61
- ⁹³ Gordon 126-127 and Morrill 124
- ⁹⁴ Morrill 124-125
- ⁹⁵ Roberts 53-55
- ⁹⁶ The Continental Army under Morgan was not burdened with artillery units. See Gordon 128
- ⁹⁷ Roberts 68
- ⁹⁸ Lawrence Babits. *A Devil of A Whipping: The Battle of Cowpens*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. 1998) 81-91
- ⁹⁹ Roberts 90-99
- ¹⁰⁰ Roberts 55 and Morrill 122
- ¹⁰¹ Roberts 48-49
- ¹⁰² Morrill 94
- ¹⁰³ The idea of social stigmatism within the British Army came was taken from a conversation during The American Revolution elective.
- ¹⁰⁴ Roberts 48-49
- ¹⁰⁵ Roberts 90-99
- ¹⁰⁶ Assessment made based on a review of the following joint publications. Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Joint Operations*. JP 3-0. (Washington D.C. 11 August 2011.) Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Foreign Internal Defenses*. JP 3-22. (Washington D.C. 12 July 2010.) Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Counterinsurgency*. JP 3-24. (Washington D.C. 05 October 2009.) Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Special Operations*. JP 3-05. (Washington D.C. 18 April 2011.)
- ¹⁰⁷ Joint Chiefs of Staff. *Counterinsurgency*. JP 3-24. (Washington D.C. 05 October 2009.)
- ¹⁰⁸ Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps. *Marine Corps Operations*. MCDP 1-0. (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 27 September 2001.) Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps. *Expeditionary Operations*. MCDP 3. (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 16 April 1998.)
- ¹⁰⁹ Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps. *Counterinsurgency*. MCWP 3-33.5. (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 15 December 2006.)
- ¹¹⁰ United States Marine Corps. *Small Wars Manuel*. (New York: Sky Horse Publishing. 2009) 12-24

¹¹¹ Small Wars Manuel 12-24, 12-26.

¹¹² Norman Gleb. *Desperate Venture*. (New York: William Morrow and Company. 1992) 140-165

¹¹³ Anthony Short. *The Communist Insurrection in Malaya*. (London: Frederick Muller Ltd. 1975) 293-295 and 352-353. The specific case referenced is the “Home Guard” program.

¹¹⁴ Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps. *Ground Combat Operations*. MCWP 3-1. (Washington, DC: Headquarters U.S. Marine Corps, 27 November 2002.)

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